

Guru Nanak in an Era of Global Thought

Sikhism, Sikh Studies, the University and the Political

Anneeth Kaur Hundle

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We are grateful to Anneeth Kaur Hundle (Assistant Professor of Anthropology and the Dhan Kaur Sahota Presidential Chair of Sikh Studies at the University of California, Irvine) for this reflective and historiographic essay on the state of Sikh Studies in the US and globally. She is the author of the forthcoming monograph *Insecurities of Expulsion: Afro-Asian Citizenship Formations and Relationalities in Racial Uganda*. She can be reached at ahundle@uci.edu.

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From Guru Nanak's perspective, the universal is seen in the particular; the universal highlights the particular, form is Formless and vice versa. It is important that the dialectic is ever alive; otherwise, Guru Nanak's vision would be misperceived. The Transcendent is not understood as actually residing within, or encapsulated within a form, for then it would become substantialized, reified, reduced to finitude. The transcendent is everywhere without being contained as such...the Ultimate never becomes immanent...[the] vision is a dynamic and joyous one in which a fluid connection between the particulars and the universal is maintained and the entire world pulsates with divine potentiality, every atom vibrating with ultimate possibility. –N-G. K. Singh (1993:40)

On October 19th-20th, 2019, Professor Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair at the University of Michigan, hosted “Guru Nanak in an Era of Global Thought: A Conference to Celebrate the 550th Anniversary of Guru Nanak's Birth” in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Mandair asked conference participants and presenters to consider the following theme: “For Guru Nanak's ideas to become legible to intellectual concerns present in contemporary academic discourse, they appear to require re-contextualization into a global context. This arena of global thought has been variously defined as comparative thought, world religions, world literatures, world philosophies, etc. Such planes of encounter require Guru Nanak's thought to be read as ‘universal’ or ‘global’ set against a variety of localized categories. But as many scholars have shown over the past few decades, the demand for the ‘global’ also alienates individuals from their own cultural contexts and experiences. The underpinning question for this conference, however, is whether there are modes of encounter that elide the universal/particular binary that captures non-Western concepts and thought within the complex structures of identity such as ethnicity, race, culture and history? Is it possible (or even necessary) to transplant Guru Nanak's key concepts and teachings beyond the localized ethnic context in which they continue to be enclosed and taken into the wider arena of global thought? Can this happen without meaningful encounter and engagement with other traditions of thought, and specifically with those of the Western variety?”

The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor was an appropriate and celebrated location to work through the possibilities of Guru Nanak's legacy, commemorate the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak and the Sikh tradition, and to interrogate the encounter between Sikh thought and global thought.

The University of Michigan has been a critical institutional site for the development of Sikh Studies as an interdisciplinary field formation in the US and Western academy. The resident Michigan Sikh community organized as the Sikh Foundation of Michigan under the leadership of *sangat* member Raman Singh and the generous support of the Chatta Family have supported Endowed Chairs in Sikh Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The commitment and dedication of the Sikh community in Michigan and in North America more broadly to help fund and support the development of Sikh Studies, and the commitment of university donor relations to establish Chairs, hire research faculty, and develop Sikh Studies curricula have provided exciting prospects and possibility for the growth of the field in the US academy. The interrelated fields of Punjab and Sikh Studies continue to grow as more academic endowed chairs or centers of study have been established across the US, Canada and the UK in recent years.

In fact, the Michigan conference was one among many hosted over the course of 2019. The conferences in 2019 examined and reassessed the spiritual, philosophical, ethical and political unfolding of Guru Nanak's thought, belief and praxis. Yet the conference also set the scene for contradictions that inevitably emerge in the context of translating and institutionalizing a relatively new field of study in the Western university. The gathering led to more critical assessments of a field that continues to reckon with its historicity, its dominant players and founders, its contradictions and its disciplining (including its minoritization and particularization in the Western university). This reckoning within the field of Sikh Studies occurs as Sikh intellectuals continue to come to terms with recent Sikh histories and events, as well as the continual unfolding of multiple scales of violence and trauma that persists within Punjabi society and Punjabi Sikh communities globally.

In Spring 2019, I hosted an inaugural event celebrating the establishment of an endowed chair in Sikh Studies in the Department of Anthropology in the School of Social Sciences at the University of California, Irvine. For the first time ever, a Sikh Studies focus is being developed in a department of anthropology, another discipline with a historically complicated relationship with "the global" and with "difference," broadly understood. Auspiciously, this occasion and my efforts to think creatively about the relationships among and between Sikh Studies, Sikh histories and presents, and anthropology in the US academy all converged with the 550th anniversary of the birth of Guru Nanak. These alignments compelled me to consider the significance of Guru Nanak's teachings and the Sikh tradition on a planetary scale, to more critically engage the categories of "tradition" "culture" and "religion" as utilized in Western academic disciplines, and envision an emergent "Critical Sikh Studies" that continually interrogates knowledge production, the contemporary university, and the relationship between scholar-researchers and local communities and social movements.

Sikhism, or *Sikhi*, emerged in the 15th century Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent, where Sikhs continue to be a majority demographic in the contemporary state of (Indian) Punjab, and a religious minority in the modern nation-state of India. Described as a monotheistic religion and constructed as a "world religion" in the Western university, the Sikh *dharm* has 30 million adherents globally. Sikhi

developed in the context of Guru Nanak Dev-Ji's divine revelation and utterance, "*na koi hindu hain, na koi mussalman hain*" (there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim). This articulation of an anti-identity politics set the stage for a critique of immanent and transcendent binaries of ontological being and organized religious identity distinctions. The Guru advocated for a formless conception of the Divine, the mastery of the divine self, complete equity and divinity of all human beings across religious, caste and gender distinctions, a pluralistic spiritual existence and achievement of One-ness with all creation in the material and immaterial world, and the eventual unification of the human form with *Naam* (the name), or the *Shabd-Guru*, the Ultimate.

The first Sikh Guru was followed by nine successive Gurus or spiritual masters, the increasing militarization of the tradition after the martyrdom of the fifth Guru, and Guru Gobind Singh's creation of the *Khalsa Panth* in 1699 which unified followers of *Sikhi* through the Khalsa identity and the figure of the *sant-sipahi* (saint-soldier). The Sikh tradition might be described as "the culmination of a series of struggles for self-preservation in a generally hostile environment" across the 16th and 17th centuries (Shackle 2004). The birth of the Khalsa transferred divine authority from the Guru lineage to the Sikh *Panth* and the Sikh sacred scriptures, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji*. Prolonged military resistance against the Mughal rulers of the 18th century gave way to the emergence of Sikh *misl*s, Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the Sikh empire until its demise through the British conquest of the Punjab in the 1840s.

The brutality of colonial rule in the Punjab and the degradation of the Punjabi and Sikh people through economic and labor extraction was successful through indirect rule and modern ethno-racial, religious, cultural and gendered constructions of the Sikhs, primarily jats, as a masculine "martial race" (in contrast to the so-called "Bengali Babu", see Sinha 1995 and Jakobsch 2006). British colonial occupation of the Punjab incorporated Sikhs as loyalists within the British Indian Army and as imperial citizens within hierarchical racial regimes of global labor diasporas in the broader British empire—including locations such as East Africa and the seaports of China (Ballantyne 2006). But this era of empire was also constituted by revolutionary individuals and political movements of anti-imperial and colonial resistance, including the celebrated figure of Shaheed Bhagat Singh and the internationalist Ghadar Party, which emerged in California and the Pacific Northwest of North America within overlapping US and British empires and settler colonial states (Ramnath 2011 and Sohi 2014). Punjabi and Sikh dissidence and complicity/collaboration amidst shifting formations of global empire (the rise of US hegemony and neoliberal capitalism) and the contemporary liberal nation-state internationalist order continue to persist today.

Sikh communities and identities continue to be shaped by colonialism and postcolonial violence, including the horrific event of Partition and the creation of a divided Punjabi society. Sikhs would lose their shared cultural, linguistic and spiritual intimacies with Punjabi Muslims, as well as important religious sites in Post-Partition Pakistan. Imperial and postcolonial violence in the Indian Punjab transformed in the context of technological innovation in the agricultural sector and the emergence of a neoliberal global order. The much-heralded Green Revolution paved the way for intensive agricul-

tural production and the class mobility of Sikh land-owners and diaspora communities. The long-term ramifications of the Green Revolution, however, include the reliance upon and exploitation of impoverished migrant laborers from other states, inequality between castes and classes, environmental degradation, disease and illness. Continued demands for autonomy and self-governance from the central government, the rise of militancy and the Congress-led attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India, followed by the assassination of Indira Gandhi, and the anti-Sikh pogroms in urban India and counter-insurgency in the Punjab throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s produced the so-called “Punjab Crisis” and the criminalization, detention, death and disappearance of thousands of young Sikh men from the Punjab. Ensuing refugee and economic migration of Sikhs from the Punjab to sites of diasporic settlement, where Sikhs still face racial and religious discrimination in a post-9/11 global world order, has led to widespread intra-community mental health issues, unaddressed trauma, addiction, domestic violence and other poor health outcomes.

The afterlives of the Partition and the Punjab crisis of the 1970s-1990s persist today in the context of divided opinions and positions on Sikh secession and nation-building (the idea of a Sikh homeland, or *Khalistan*) across the Indian Punjab and its global diasporas. These demands are articulated amidst a panoply of claims for some form of Sikh autonomy or federalism in relation to the Indian central government as well as pessimism surrounding the corruption and incompetence of the existing Punjab government leadership. Utopic imaginaries of Punjab territorial autonomy are interlaced with spiritual and extra-territorial notions of Sikh sovereignty. These claims harken back to independence-era political movements for Punjab unionism and a Punjabi *suba*. They are also variously constructed in relation to modernist nationalist imaginaries and a recalling of the Sikh empire, the tragedy of the Partition of the Punjab, and ideas of *Punjabiyaat*, an imagined and idealized but still circulating political formation in the minds, bodies and hearts of Punjabi people with shared cultural heritage and attachments to land and territory across the Indo-Pak border.

These traumatic events in Sikhs’ living memory or their recall of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial histories, including the brutal executions and martyrdoms of the fifth and ninth Gurus, among other revered martial and anti-colonial figures, continue to persist in the collective memory and consciousness of Sikh people. This social memory, coupled with survival instincts and a spirit of resistance and *chardi kala* (eternal resilience) generally unify Sikhs against religious intolerance and persecution, as well as authoritarian state oppression. Khalsa Sikhs and Sikh identifying-communities follow *Gurmat*, or the counsel of the Gurus, and practice recitation of *naam-simran* and *shabd-kirtan* in order to maintain a state of Oneness and connection to the Divine Creator. To be a Sikh means to undergo a continual process of self-transformation, to be in the flow of an emergent process of remembrance of the divine, interconnection with all things in creation, including an ecology that encompasses the non-human and the surrounding environment.

Some of the utopic and aspirational principles of the Sikh tradition include a rejection of caste distinctions, a respect for gender/sex equality, militancy for self-defense and the protection of oppressed

people, and a commitment to social justice and *seva* (selfless service) to humanity and broader society (although it is important to note that caste, class and gender and sexuality-based inequalities plague Sikh societies and bring ideals and practice into constant tension with each other). Although some individuals who identify as Sikh may possess more secular subjectivities, Sikh values are generally underpinned by the recalling of Sikh historical tradition and therefore a living tradition committed to spirituality and a divine order of existence. The Sikh tradition and its contemporary expressions exceed the rationalities of the liberal-secular-nation-state logics of our contemporary global order, as expressed by the Indian nation and its fraught relationship with the categories of religion and secularism in discourse and practice, as well as other liberal multi-cultural contexts in which diasporic Sikh communities have settled.

Sikh Studies, as an academic field, emerged in the 1960s in universities in Western Europe and in the US. As a relatively modern field of study, it is deeply tied to the eventful character of Punjab and Sikh history outlined above. The field has primarily been organized around the disciplines of history, anthropology, and the study of religion through a secular lens, alongside Orientalist and colonial interventions and translations, including anthropological accounts of Punjabi and Sikh people developed through travel writing, missionary and other colonial administrative accounts. These accounts were central to the construction of martial race ideology and the codification and translation of Sikhi as a modern Sikh religion. In the context of post-Cold War geopolitics and area studies knowledge formations, Sikh Studies was also largely interpreted as a small, parochial field within South Asia Studies and (Indian) Punjab Studies, although we can now speak of both interrelated and disjunctive fields Punjab and Sikh Studies (see also Malhotra and Mir 2012). Importantly, as a relatively modern spiritual tradition, Sikh Studies was and continues to be marginalized in Religious Studies and Indian Philosophy.

Numerous scholars now agree that colonized Sikhs became part of a “self-Orientalizing” ethos within Sikh Studies during the British Raj period. While Christopher Shackle (2004) notes that Punjabi Singh Sabha intellectuals in the late 19th century were the first generation of innovative Sikh scholars, others note that they were also engaged in a scholarly project of inventing tradition in relation to the Victorian ideals of British colonization of the Punjab and India, working to purify the actually existing complexity of the Sikh tradition, fixing an emergent tradition and way of life into straight-jacketed religious, racial and gender identities (Jakobsch 2003, Mandair 2005, Mandair 2013). Thus, Sikh Studies has been informed by the objectifying aims of elite Orientalist scholars (both European and indigenous Punjabi Sikhs) who participated in what Congolese philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe (1988) might describe as a “colonial library” (in the case of Africa, for Mudimbe).

Thus in Sikh Studies, the Sikh tradition was fashioned by a colonial library in relation to a project of Western modernity, and it is generally accepted that the field requires a constant discursive and onto-epistemological questioning of the construction of the category Sikhism and “Sikh” itself, including a strong focus on religious identity and community construction. Historical and contemporary projects

of colonial and postcolonial identity formations and the lived experiences and complexity of Sikh life in historical-material context continue to be a key intellectual strain in contemporary Sikh Studies. This debate was most strongly exemplified, for example, by the political fall-out over the publication of Harjot Oberoi's (1994) *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, a foundational text that became controversial in the context of the so-called Punjab crisis and Sikh communities' desires to articulate and represent a unified political and religious identity in the aftermath of the assault by the Indian government and anti-Sikh pogroms. But more recently, tensions between and among disciplinary and methodological interpretations of "Sikh" and "Sikhi" as modern religious identity, vernacular cultural space, set of practices or living tradition continue to mark innovations in an unfolding field formation.

The field has been strongly influenced by the migration of Sikh intellectuals to the UK, Canada and the US, including tensions between Orientalist-trained scholars in the Western academy and diasporic intellectuals negotiating the political contexts of avowedly liberal secular multicultural nation-states. Thus Sikh Studies retains a strong diasporic element; in fact, the study of Sikh diasporas came to shape concerns within South Asian diaspora studies and transnational feminist studies. Sikh Studies contributed to theories of the diasporic subject that is shaped through violence, trauma and memory, as well as the diasporic construction of the homeland of Punjab and the construction of the American citizen-subject (see especially Mahmood 1996, Axel 2001, Grewal 2005, Nijhawan 2016). Scholars have articulated different visions of a Sikh Studies located within the territorial Punjab (with a continued focus on Punjab and Sikh Studies and an historiographical and anthropological understanding of Punjab as a site of shared devotional piety across Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities, or a de-territorialized Sikh Studies shaped by diaspora communities and diaspora communities).

Sikh Studies has also been shaped by the broader post-structural and postcolonial shifts that have characterized the humanities as a whole. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, critical theory and interdisciplinarity re-invigorated the field, and new questions concerning colonial violence, language and translation, power, agency, and resistance, identity, subjectivity and experience, the study of religious and secular formations, critical race theory, feminist and queer theory, and the internal crisis of disciplines such as anthropology re-shaped knowledge production about Sikhs and Sikhism. Sikhs intellectuals themselves were reworking Sikh Studies. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh's scholarship, for example, traversed women's studies and religious studies to offer feminine, feminist and proto-queer interpretations of Sikh manuscripts and key Sikh historical events like the birth of the Khalsa (Singh 1993; 2005). This foundational work offered a response to white liberal feminist interpretations of Sikh heteropatriarchy by recovering an endogenous notion of Sikh critique of gender inequalities through deep engagement with *Gurbani*.

All of these innovations occurred as this generation of intellectuals were dealing with the lived experience and violent afterlives of 1980s and 1990s Punjab and the rise of new ethno-nationalisms and separatist and secessionist projects—both in Punjab and in the diaspora. And, while Sikh scholars

worked deeply to reassess manuscript traditions in relation to critical theory in the Western academy, they were often accused of being disconnected from the needs of the community. The previous generation of scholars (and ours) realized the importance and influence of the concerns of our families and communities in shaping the aims of Sikh Studies, our role in responding to them, and the need to critically undertake intellectual-activist binaries as they operate in the academy—all while negotiating the realities of postcolonial violence and racist, religious and gendered oppression in liberal secular states and the liberal university. They, and we, worked with, against, and in ambivalent relationship to the structures and realities of academia as “ivory tower”, meeting the demands of the research university, while also attempting to understand the needs of Sikh communities and to make Sikh Studies accessible and legible in the public sphere.

Shackle thus describes a “fourth generation” of diasporic scholars who are newly engaged in Sikh Studies from their particular locations and material and social conditions—these locations might not be in the Punjab or in a singular notion of a diasporic “homeland” but informed by the multiple transnational locations that reflect the changing circumstances and conditions of Sikh migration, settlement, mobility and precarity (see also Singh 2018 on “the millennial generation” of Sikhs). As a second-generation (American) and transnational Sikh intellectual, I locate myself within these multi-generational intellectual histories and multiply-located investments, thinking seriously about the ways in which Sikh Studies might integrate critical thought from Sikh, Punjabi and Western intellectual traditions, as well as other archives of global thought and local, contextualized forms of meaning-making. This imaginary allows us to envision new possibilities for both Sikh Studies and a globally-informed university truly committed to the cultural, racial and religious diversity of its constituents and their desire for knowledge relevant to their life experiences and futures. This is especially significant as we see the entry of members of the marginalized or dissident South Asian diasporic youth in the academy, including Sikhs and Muslims, but also the class and caste-oppressed within the US academy. Many are becoming interested in higher education humanities and social sciences as they face precarity in other sectors of training that once guaranteed material and financial security. Recent endeavors in the US academy, such as a stronger focus on the intersections of race, religion and caste; the formation of the Critical Kashmir Studies Collective, the Sikh Feminisms Working Group that I convened at UCI starting in November 2020, and even recent calls to “decolonize Sikh Studies” (Dhamoon and Sian 2020) reflect new orientations in critical area and religious studies in the US academy, as well as the next phase of a Punjabi and Sikh Studies.

Returning to the Michigan conference, presenters took seriously the call to work with Sikh concepts and ideas emerging from Guru Nanak’s life work and bani, examining them in relation to global and universal (Western concepts). Within the field of Sikh Studies, the philosophical turn initiated by Arvind Mandair’s (2009) scholarship has queried the category of religion itself, dismantling world religions and comparative religion frameworks to more clearly demarcate Sikh thought as *another* modality of universal thought, as a living tradition, philosophy, form of reason, world-view and way of life. At

the conference, we worked through the ways in which Guru Nanak's teachings of *Ek Onkar* (Oneness), among others, can be centered in and central to the production of mainstream, universal knowledge without falling into the traps of colonial "mimesis" or various forms of imperial domination—without Guru Nanak's thought becoming "cliché" multicultural lingo. Sikh knowledge formations, including an assessment of their co-optations by the market, become ever more important in relation to Sikh embodied and material precarity in the US. Ecological, economic, gendered, racialized, and governance crises, all connected to the global ascendancy of neoliberal capitalist empire, authoritarianism, and Christian and racial/ethnic chauvinisms, threaten both the public university and the possibilities of a critical Sikh Studies. It is more than clear that universities and nations are not operating on pluriversal models, but, in the U.S., and at least since 1965, on the basis of explicitly right-wing, White supremacist and Christian-oriented or liberal secular humanist models that continue to mask and efface their embedded exclusions.

More recently, the liberal-secular multicultural university is under threat in the wake of Trumpism and the overt annihilation of difference through attacks on critical race and ethnic studies programs, among others. The intensification of (neo)liberal state violence in its privileging of "the economy" and "the market" over citizens during the global COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Black and Asian violence, and the recent attack on Capitol Hill reveals that imperialism abroad has come home, that Malcolm X's statement that "the chickens are coming home to roost" seems more relevant than ever. This endemic form of necropolitical violence has been common to the postcolonial experience of the global south but had often been shielded from the privileged classes in so-called liberal-democratic states through ideologies of American exceptionality and mythology. By extension, the contemporary university is at the epicenter of epistemological crisis and anxiety about its role and relationship to Trumpism and the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly as the "epistemic baseline" of liberal rationality based upon appeals to truth, fact and reason are under threat by right-wing ascendancy, the rise of "postmodern conservatism" (McManus 2020) and conspiracy theory across a large swathe of the American population.

In the US academy, there have been two dominant approaches to this situation in both discourse and practice. One, of course, is a reactionary return to the safeguarding of a liberal secular humanist conceptual apparatus as epistemological norm and in university governance practice. A second, embraced by segments of the academic Left, has been excitement about re-enlivening ontological and epistemological possibility by more fully embracing and expanding upon already-existing or embodied radical, ethical, and spiritual life-ways, of building on existing radical Left, anti-racist, feminist, queer and critical religious studies orientations to expand the horizons of humanity and human consciousness and action to new ends and ideals. In a recent piece called "Crisis, Epochal Shifts, and Conceptual Disenchantment", political anthropologist Deborah Thomas (2019) argues that we are in the midst of the long denouement of Western modernity and the limits of liberal secular humanism and the modalities of power and governance it has established. She argues that we are currently

witnessing the death of the West and this requires us to rethink our approach to understanding political and ethical life moving forward, moving away from the language of crisis towards the study of “epochal shift.”

In arguing for the time-space scale of an “epochal shift” Thomas observes that this is the moment to rethink the parameters of the human, and to reflect on how our actions, and our words, create effects in the world. While her work primarily focuses on the Trans-Atlantic worlds of slavery, plantation economy and abolitionist insurgency that have constituted Blackness within the US settler colonial and imperialist state, I build on these ideas to encompass the South Asian/Punjabi Sikh diasporic context, noting the work of existing Sikh Studies scholars to expand notions of the human. I suggest that we continue expanding the archives and intellectual traditions with which Sikh Studies should engage, all while attending to sly co-optations of “the global”, as suggested by Mandair at the outset of the Michigan conference. The “epochal shift” of a new global order is intimately tied to social movements and projects surrounding anti-fascist struggle, “the abolitionist university” and “decolonizing the university” that extend from the US/Europe, to Eastern and Southern Africa, to South Asia. In the UC, Black, Latinx and indigenous scholar-activists have called for an end to policing and militarization in the university by mainstreaming ideas of “abolition democracy” (Davis 2005) that are national and increasingly global in scope. At UCI we are thus thinking deeply about centering Sikh and Punjabi diaspora communities’ *relationality* with indigenous, Latinx and Black and African diaspora-descendant communities, what I have framed in other work as “the possibility and potentiality of Afro-Asian relationalities” (Hundle, forthcoming; see also Leonard 1992).

At an epistemological level, the US university has generally excluded Sikh thought from its organizing logics. As Roderick Ferguson (2012) notes, the university functions as an archiving institution for the so-called “interdisciplines”—that “simultaneously determine(s) who gets admitted while establishing the rules for membership and participation” (Ferguson, 12). Sikh Studies in the US academy has emerged from the conjuncture of the failure of the settler colonial/liberal secular university to adequately “include”; from the domestication and management of racial, religious and cultural difference, from what Inderpal Grewal (2017) describes as the “advanced neoliberalism” of 21st century US empire and its broader effects on public education and the public university, from the classical typologies of religious studies departments, from area studies formations of South Asian Studies that have been exclusionary of minority religious traditions and caste-oppressed groups. We might understand Sikh Studies to be constitutive of the neoliberal university and vice versa—it has been uniquely funded and supported by community donors as a response to the neoliberal, racial and liberal secular logics of the university, but it is also part of that process of neo-liberalization itself. It is important for Sikh Studies and Sikh Studies scholars to understand this and reflect on this consciously moving forward—such that they understand the possibilities, potential, and privileges that Sikh Studies might possess in shaping innovative research programs and curriculums in relation to the rapidly shifting conditions of the university.

In my own discipline of anthropology, Sikh Studies is both an exciting and challenging endeavor. Ethnographic methodologies provide possibilities for cross-community and intellectual “encounter” and for grounded, contextualized attention to “Sikh life” and Sikhi in practice. Nonetheless, both “culture” and “difference” are highly mediated terms. Anthropology has long been a knowledge project linked to either overt imperialist and cultural, political and economic domination or the covert management and regulation of non-Western modes of being through liberal secular frameworks of cultural relativism, difference, or alterity. Epistemic anxieties over the culture concept have long characterized the discipline, and both Black/African diaspora and postcolonial anthropologists from the South have worked to “decolonize the discipline from within.” Haitian anthropologist Michel Rolph-Trouillot (2003), for example, described anthropology’s “savage slot,” observing that anthropology is structured on the basis of the onto-epistemological problem of the Western self/non-Western other binary, an inherent and subtle nativism that undergirds anthropology knowledge formations.

These projects of continue to be contested by postcolonial and decolonizing approaches, critical approaches to religion and secularism, critical race theory, feminist and queer studies, political anthropology, and even recent calls to rethink theory from the global south. A productive dialogue between Sikh Studies and anthropology builds on existing innovations in the anthropology of race and religion, but also might be framed more adequately within global and university discourse as a philosophical-anthropology or anthropological-philosophy approach. This would entail a stronger effort to center new ontological and epistemological horizons for radical notions of the human, self and community in relation to the sacred and divine, for allowing Sikh Studies and the Sikh tradition to shape what Achille Mbembe (2015) has described as the possibility of the “pluriversal university.”

We saw these projects taking shape clearly at the 2019 conference. Nardina Kaur’s discussion of a “cross-cultural philosophy” emerging from Guru Nanak’s thought, their use of the category of “religio-philosophy” and moving example of the embodied practice of *seva* in a UK *gurudwara* and its relationship to the transformation of the self was one example of working past universal-particular and religion-secular binaries that dominate Western societies and Western universities. Balbinder Bhojal’s understanding of the “affective-sensorium matrix,” of the “before consciousness” as a mode of thought that might approximate Guru Nanak’s thought moved us into new interpretations of Sikh philosophy.

Engaging Guru Nanak’s thought through dialogic relationality and encounter was also relevant to the study of textual sources, including Harjeet Grewal’s presentation on *Sajan Thag Sakhi* and Puninder Singh’s analysis of three concepts emerging from *Sid Ghost* and its engagement with modernity. Pashaura Singh’s keynote address offered us themes from Guru Nanak’s life and contributions that we might take up in the practice of Sikh thought as global thought. These themes encompassed dialogic engagement (*Sikhi* as a genre and practice of reason), resistance and agency to despotic and authoritarian power, notions of sovereignty emerging from the life-world of the divine, the making of the perfect self, and the relationship of the self to community and the divine. Nikky-Guninder Kaur

Singh shared a vision of aesthetics and poetics as analytic for framing Guru Nanak's bani as onto-epistemology. Francesca Cassio offered a decolonial framework for critiquing the commercialization of Sikh traditional music as a category of "world music." Bhai Baldeep Singh allowed us to enter this sonic world and time-space of *Sikhi* through his embodied performance of classical raags in the tradition. Finally, Kamala Nayer examined Guru Nanak's concepts for our late capitalist, market-based engagements with addiction recovery and mental health, framing therapeutic possibilities and the healing of intergenerational trauma and violence through a *Sikhi*-based framework.

Punjab-based Sikh scholars also skyped into the conference and gave papers in Punjabi language, and thus both English and Punjabi language sessions and bilingual audience members were part of the conference (this was pre-pandemic, pre-Zoom academia). The use of both languages provided a sense of the multi-dimensionality of language and the need to study concepts and categories across Punjabi and English language, as well as more engagement with theories of translation in the field. Speaking in Punjabi, Professors Jagdish Singh, Amarjit Singh, Amaninder Singh, Lakhvir Singh and Sukhwinder Singh articulated the possibilities of a distinctive Sikh philosophy that exceeds modern liberal, secular, and historical-materialist (Marxist) modes of interpretation, translation and critique. They re-engaged textual sources, examined Sikh categories of temporality and spatiality, assessed Western theory's Eurocentric understandings of power and sovereignty in relation to Sikh thought, and analyzed textual transformations in Guru Nanak's "image," or tensions between cosmic and conventional anthropological understandings of Guru Nanak. Finally, T. Sher Singh re-asserted the importance of Guru Nanak in our contemporary lives, reframing our Western understandings of the revolutionary or political, particularly in relation to the ongoing heteropatriarchal oppression of Sikh women in the Guru *panth*.

How will the field of Sikh Studies continue to grow? What theoretical toolkits, archives, and disciplinary, inter-or-transdisciplinary training will we need to continue positing Sikh thought as global thought? How will we divide our time between reading Gurbani and other Sikh manuscript traditions, becoming conversant with and in dialogue with Western intellectual traditions (and their limitations), and then moving on to other intellectual traditions for dialogue, translation and world-historical possibility? In addition to critical engagements with Western philosophy, one key arena of Sikh Studies' engagement is the centrality of Africa, African Studies and Black Studies within global thought. This encounter requires a more thorough, critical engagement with Sikh sources of settler colonial complicity, anti-Black racism/anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, homophobia and sexism, and gender, racial and caste-based violence. Sikh Studies should be deeply conversant with liberation traditions, including the Left-Marxist tradition, caste abolitionism and Black Studies—including but not limited to the Black radical tradition, Black internationalism, Pan-Africanism, Afro-Asianism, Black feminisms and African philosophy; Islamic/Sufism Studies and Buddhist Studies; Latinx/Chicanx studies; indigenous/Native Studies; and intersectional, postcolonial and transnational feminist studies.

In addition to its conventional territorial focus on the Punjab and UK, Canadian and US diaspora

communities, we might expand our studies to consider Sikh life in East Africa, Pakistan, Kashmir, Afghanistan, the Middle East, and a number of other locations. Punjab might better be conceived as a global and transnational formation, one that continues to resist nationalist and geopolitical boundaries, as exemplified by the recent opening of the Kartarpur Corridor. Sikh Studies must continue to engage in intellectual-activist solidarities surrounding settler-colonial complicity and anti-Blackness within and among South Asian diasporas and the settler-colonial occupation of Kashmir and Palestine. It should consider the role that militarization and the rise of the security and carceral state have played in the Islamophobic Global War on Terror and among Sikh communities in India and the diaspora (Puar 2009, Grewal 2017). *In other words, Sikh Studies can and should be part of these expanding intellectual-activist practices, debates and traditions in the university. Sikhs have been intimately tied to the making of the imperial/global world order, and part of a global critical tradition of thought and praxis to dismantle it and envision radical possibilities.*

How might we collaborate across our training and expertise to develop a toolkit that might make Sikh histories, tradition, and concepts accessible and available? How can we work more effectively with each other as colleagues, with language instructors, with our students and with community members? How will we labor in sensitive, compassionate and empathetic ways, attending to the depths of violence in our lived realities and contexts? How will we negotiate the varied expectations of donor communities, university administrators, departments, and the disciplining imperatives of the university—all while we labor to decolonize the university and the field of Sikh Studies? What interdisciplinary field formations have yet to emerge? To what extent will they be institutionalized and legible, or purposefully made untranslatable or fugitive in their expression (Harney and Moten 2013)? What Sikh feminist ethics and principles of care, accountability, and responsibility might we bring to this university labor, in our collegial and student mentoring relationships, and in our communities and wider networks? How will we forge a Sikh Studies that is relevant to young people and their lives today? Finally, how will we deepen our knowledge of and take seriously Guru Nanak's revolutionary philosophy, all while being nuanced in our understandings of modernity, late capitalist empire, liberal secular humanism, and political formations of the state, community, citizenship, subjectivity and identity? How will we make Guru Nanak's ideas legible in the context of the universalizing demands of the university and the particularizing aims of minoritization in liberal nation-states? These are open-ended questions, but ones that I lay out in order to begin examining how we might work in a practical vein within and beyond the norms of the contemporary university to accomplish our goals.

This overview of Sikh history/ the history of Sikh Studies and the possible form and shape it may take is a deeply materialist issue with political ramifications. The 2019 conference celebrating the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak coincided with the Indian government's unscrupulous revocation of Article 370, an enactment of legal-judicial and sovereign violence that ended Kashmiri sovereignty and formalized Indian settler colonial rule in the disputed territory. The right-wing BJP/Modi government has also continued its assault on the Muslim religious minority population in India. It has

been assisted in its aims by global neoliberal orthodoxy, its allyship with the US in the global War on Terror with Pakistan and other Muslim-majority neighboring states that are rendered enemy, and Hindutva aims to create a Hindu nation composed of normative Hindu citizens speaking Hindi language. The NRC and CAA amendments, which were intended to socially engineer citizenship by revoking citizenship for Muslims and “saving” persecuted minorities from so-called Dharmic traditions including Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs from Pakistan, Kashmir, and Afghanistan, have advanced an imperialist political strategy of dividing the Sikh community internally and weaponizing Sikh bodies for Islamophobic anti-Muslim nationalist and geopolitical aspirations. The Hindutva-led state has also long engaged in a project of attempting to incorporate and redefine Sikhism as a sect of Hinduism, rather than an independent tradition that signals a break with Brahmanical patriarchal casteism, but that is conversant with both Sufi Islam and the sant tradition.

Almost a year later, the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, illness and death in the body politic, the increasing militarization and policing of public life, the transition to remote and virtual technology to fulfill the demands of labor extraction and capital accumulation in conjunction with increasing corporate and state surveillance through new technologies of governance—all of this continues to make life ever more precarious for targeted religious minorities, caste-oppressed people, and the poor. By late fall 2020, the undemocratic passing of agricultural laws meant to deregulate and privatize agrarian markets in Punjab and Haryana at the expense of the lives and livelihoods of small farmers and workers have led to a massive *andolan* and an encampment of protestors at key Delhi border sites and the development of a transnational social movement, *Kisaan Mazdoor Ekta Zindabad*. Punjabi and Sikh farmers have been joined by farmers across India in massive protests against the neoliberal authoritarian policies of the BJP government and its crony capitalists. Global Sikh diasporas stand in solidarity with the anti-state protests, and continue to protest the religious profiling, criminalization, arrest and detention of Sikh activists, particularly young men. The Indian state media’s tactics of resurrecting, circulating and conflating tropes and archetypes of the Sikh militant body, the Khalistani Sikh separatist and the Sikh activist/dissident as terrorists figures is deeply disturbing and consistent with a longer state-based history of criminalizing dissent and difference in the Indian body politic and within an increasingly complex South Asian/Indian diaspora. Nonetheless, Sikh ethics and practices of humanitarianism and resistance to state authoritarianism continue to characterize these powerful protests. *Kisaans* have resisted police brutality in the form of blockades, teargas, water cannon and lathi-charge assaults. These violent incidents are endured alongside participation in spiritual practices of langar and *seva*, *ardas*, shabd-kirtan, and *naam-simran* in the Delhi border encampments. The Sikh tradition of resistance to persecution and state power and the protection of sovereign life exists and persists, allowing us to more carefully consider the role of “religion” in so-called “secular” protest, the situated and contingent nature of religious and caste-based solidarities (including their possibilities and limits), and a more cosmopolitan, universal attitude and practice of socialist and communitarian ethics surrounding labor, community sustenance and flourishing, and care.

In the US, *sangat* members have been responding to the pandemic and necrocapitalism (Banerjee 2008) by feeding an increasingly diseased and sick, food-insecure and economically destitute American population, harboring neighbors in *gurudwaras* in the context of California's unfolding ecological disasters and participating in Black Lives Matter solidarity protests against the police brutality of Black Americans. Sikh youth in UC universities and in California high schools are involved in community-based organizations like the Jakara Movement and Sikh Student Associations, participating in social justice and mutual aid projects that extend beyond their immediate *gurudwara* communities. They are participating in diaspora solidarity efforts with Indian farmers and workers. Many are thinking through the implications of the global war on terror in their everyday lives, wondering why military and army recruiters are present in their universities and *gurudwaras*. Some are building stronger connections between struggles in Punjab and their own communities with Kashmir and Palestine. I have been heartened by these grounded and practiced critiques of imperial/colonial racial and class incorporation and model minority state recognition, as well as the prominent role of Sikh women in these organizations, protests and actions globally. These planetary enactments of cross-racial, cross-religious, feminist, class and caste-based solidarity bode well for the longevity of a social justice tradition, although they have yet to be studied and understood more deeply. (It is important to note that political institutions, associations and unions in Punjab are generally heteropatriarchal in nature and continue to proffer ideological rationalizations for the exclusion of women or feminist models of political leadership. Anti-Black racism, heteropatriarchy, caste violence and gendered caste violence among class and caste-privileged Sikhs persist in the Punjab and the diaspora. Appeals to model minority recognition, a disregard for the poor and the neoliberal policies that produce inequity, and anti-Black racism/anti-Blackness and Islamophobia persist among liberal Sikh diaspora elites.)

What is clear, however, is that we are living through emergent possibilities of political and ethical life in public life as the boundaries between public and private life blur and as the conditions and constitution of community, citizenship, and identity transform, especially inter-generationally. A commitment to radical vulnerability and self-introspection, to pluralism and living with difference, to the abolition of casteism, heteropatriarchy, racism and capitalism, and resistance to corrupt oligarchic elites and hierarchical, authoritarian power, can and should characterize the Sikh tradition, Sikh praxis, and Sikh Studies in its most exalted expression. This world-view and way of being in the world, which began 550 years ago, melds the political and spiritual. It exceeds imperialist and nationalist imaginaries, liberal-secular-humanist norms, and the historical-materialist conditions of our planet, breaking down received binaries between transcendence/immanence, universal/particular. Let us take these emergent possibilities of worlding from dissenting diasporas, social movements and lived practice to our disciplinary formations, the university, and the academy—approaching these two interconnected and dialectic realms with renewed energy, creativity and possibility.

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